

ASPECTS OF MODERN PESSIMISM ¹

These essays represent four chapters of a projected work on the Problem of Evil in Modern Pessimism. In this work the author undertakes an examination of the various philosophies of negation and despair—logical, æsthetic, social, moral, religious—regarding them as inverted theories of value. The pessimist condemns and despairs of the world for reasons which may be just as enlightening to the searcher after the values of life as the reasons which lead his neighbor to trust in man's immortal destiny. The idea of immortality is the peak of man's hope; the problem of evil, the pitfall before his feet: between dismay and hope stretches the life-path of man. On this path three travellers—a saint, a singer, and a sage—are observed here, seeking light in the twilight that engulfs our mortal career.

I

PASCAL'S DESPAIR OF REASON

I

IN the knowledge of truth is man's hope of freedom, and our whole dignity and worth is in our thought; yet thought is also the first source of our misery; it yokes us to plough in the marshes of doubt. He that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow, sighed Ecclesiastes, and the primitive wisdom of Israel had already passed judgment on

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intelligence in the old story of the Fall of Man. What banished Adam and Eve from Paradise? Eating of the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil. Profoundly significant is this Hebrew recognition that man's first woes were due to his inability to check his inquiring turn of mind. Dove, lamb, and sheep remained blissfully in Eden; they had not been moved to eat of the Tree of Knowledge.

Whether it be owing to our intelligence, or to our insufficiency of it, many of us pass from pious innocence in childhood to unsettled unbelieving youth, and to half-believing or indifferent gray maturity, often wistfully recalling the green days of whole-hearted, joyous trust. It was not by this road that, in his brief span of thirty-nine years, Blaise Pascal reached the evening twilight of defiant faith and finality. His mind's history had proceeded on an entirely unconventional schedule. How amazingly unconventional, let Chateaubriand tell us in his *Génie du Christianisme*:

"There was a man who at the age of twelve, with *bars* and *rings*, created mathematics; who at sixteen wrote the most learned treatise on conic sections produced since antiquity; who at nineteen reduced to a machine a science existing wholly in the understanding; who at twenty-three demonstrated the phenomena of air-pressure and destroyed one of the great errors of ancient physics; who at this age when other men are barely born, having covered the round of human knowledge, perceived its nothingness and turned his thoughts to religion; who from that moment until his death, in his thirty-ninth year, sick and suffering all the time, fixed the language spoken by Bossuet and Racine, gave the model of the most perfect pleasantries and of the most vigorous reasoning; who finally, in the brief intervals

between his ills, solved abstractly one of the highest problems of geometry and jotted on paper thoughts which partake as much of the Divine as of the human: this terrible genius was called *Blaise Pascal*."

The early training of this amazing mind was calculated least of all to encourage sceptical tendencies, but rather to develop the self-assurance of the intellect. Étienne Pascal, himself a savant and mathematician of note, made the education of his son Blaise his main concern in life, and his deliberate aim was consistently to keep the youth above and ahead of his task. The boy should undertake no problem likely to overtax or baffle his abilities. This was to be no overfed infant prodigy: he was not to study Latin or Greek until he was twelve, nor mathematics before fifteen. His whole education was intended progressively to lead him, self-assured and confident in the powers of his mind, to more and more difficult problems. This complacent gait Blaise would not follow; learning that geometry had to do with lines and circles, bars and rings, he re-invented Euclid at the age of twelve, wrecked his father's pedagogy, and joined the elder Pascal's own scientific society.

In this very early and vigorous mental life, religion seems to have played no part. The father was no free-thinker, nor the family as a whole in any way lax; but while altogether conformist and reverent, Étienne Pascal kept his faith and his science on genial neighborly terms. To the young mathematical genius, religion came incidentally and, as it were, in its place: it did not dominate his daily life, as it did not disturb overmuch that of his father. It was later in his youth, at an age when vigilant minds begin to worry lest they lose their faith, that Pascal first really

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found faith as a dominant force in his own life. The Pascals were then living in Rouen, where the father was a high official. In January, 1646, while on his way to stop a duel, Étienne Pascal slipped on the ice and fractured a leg. The two medicos who attended him must have been versed in curing both soul and body, for by the time the broken limb was healed, the entire Pascal family was converted to the intense Augustinian Catholicism which Cornelius Jansenius, bishop of Ypres, had championed and of which the Abbey of Port Royal, under the guidance of St. Cyran, was the living heart.

If heretofore science and worldliness had marked the life of the Pascals, henceforth devotion to God and his grace are to claim them all: father, son, two daughters. From this time forth the debutante Jacqueline was bound for the cloister; her married sister Gilberte was to live a life of the most rigorous piety; the father's closing years were aglow with Jansenist enthusiasm. The intensity of Blaise Pascal's devotion fluctuated, but if there were lapses of worldliness, the return was to a piety doubly profound. One does Pascal an injustice in attributing his religiosity to his ill health. Ill health and the compulsory relaxation ordered by his physicians sent him into the gay life of society, but he turned from it to experience a second conversion, soul-consuming and irrevocable. From that Monday night in November, 1654, until his death in 1662, Pascal was first and last a warrior for the faith.

But the citadel which he defended was a citadel besieged: Jansenism was under the cloud of heresy. The invalid genius whose youth had written new chapters in the history of science was now destined to write masterpieces of religious controversy, the *Lettres Provinciales* in which he

champions St. Augustine and Port Royal against the casuistry of the Jesuits.

The main issue between Jensenist and Jesuit is all-important: it concerns the doctrine of grace and the salvation of man. Does man's free-will contribute to his own salvation; is salvation in any sense whatever earned by man or is it altogether a free gift of God? This problem is not exclusively Christian. The Hindu observes a little kitten in dire peril; the mother cat seizes it by the nape of the neck and carries it, limp and helpless, to safety. But see the baby monkey similarly snatched away from danger: the old monkey does her best for it, but the little one also scrambles away for all it is worth. Which of these two is the better analogy of man's salvation by God? Hindu theologians argued ardently over the cat-hold and the monkey-hold theory.

The first essential of a religion of salvation is the recognition of the utter sinfulness of man; attenuate or explain away the actuality of evil, says the orthodox theologian, and the religion of Christ, the Saviour of men, is no more. The whole scheme of salvation implies man's dire need of it. If man can save himself, what need of the Redeemer? So man cannot save himself because he is born in sin. Salvation then is a free gift of God to man, a gift which God does not owe to anyone. Shall we add: a gift which God does not grant to all? Unless we do, hell is likely to lose its salutary terrors; if we do add it, we open the door to a pack of vicious problems. Here the Church has traditionally leaned on St. Augustine's doctrine of grace, against the dualistic heresy of the Manichean which treats evil as coeval and coördinate with good, and likewise against the Pelagian heresy which is ambiguous and

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negligent of the fatal reality of evil, and which regards man as actively contributing to his own salvation.

St. Augustine's position is presumably orthodox; but what is the true Augustinian doctrine? Surely, we are told, it is not the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. According to Calvin, as Catholics understood him, man, tainted from birth with original sin, is bound for hell everlasting. But some men God predestines to salvation. A soul thus elected to grace is saved, justified, and sanctified by the free gift of God. God, then, predestines some men to heaven, others to hell, without any prevision of their sins and irrespective of repentance or merit on their part.

Against Calvinism arise the followers of Molina, a Spanish Jesuit who, in 1588, espoused a doctrine of salvation decidedly Pelagian: God has conditionally willed to save all, but upon man's actually availing himself of this sufficing grace freely bestowed by the Redeemer, depends the effectiveness of the grace to save. And even when the saving grace is withdrawn, man still retains the power to reach after and regain it. This Jesuit view was abhorrent to Pascal: it rejected St. Augustine's truth along with Calvin's heresy. Whereas Calvin makes God's will the absolute author alike of man's salvation and of his damnation, the Jesuit doctrine makes both proceed essentially from the will of man.

A third position is that of the Dominicans, followers of St. Thomas. If all men are burdened with sin, all are accorded the gift of grace through Christ's death. This grace does not save and sanctify man, but it does open our eyes to see good and evil, it makes us capable of choosing the one or the other. But while our rejection of this gift of God will damn us, our acceptance of the gift is not sufficient for salvation. For saintliness and eternal bliss, God gives

to the elect souls a second grace, free, irresistible, *grace efficace*. So long as God thus sustains the soul of the elect, it is saintly. Should the hand of God be withdrawn, there remains to the soul a power strong enough to fulfill God's commandments, but not strong enough to save.

The fourth doctrine of grace is the doctrine of St. Augustine as interpreted by the Jansenists. It is the doctrine defended by Pascal. Adam's free choice of evil has tainted all mankind with original sin, and God could with perfect justice have damned us every one. But in his all pure and free mercy God has elected some to grace. To some the grace of God has not been accorded at all; others God has willed to redeem and has given them grace which would have led them to heaven had they also been given the singular grace of perseverance, without which one cannot attain unto saintliness; to still others, blessed souls, God has accorded grace certain and infallible. Let each man believe, but believe with trembling, that he is among the elect, let him not judge that anyone, be he the most evil and impious, is among the damned, so long as one breath of life remains. Man's free-will brought evil into the world; God wills the damnation of the wicked conditionally and by prevision; the salvation of the elect souls God wills absolutely.

A dispute among theologians is apt to become arid and abstruse. Back of this trio of Catholic doctrines—Molinist, Neo-Thomist, Jansenist—we find two heresies in conflict: on the one hand, the heresy of pagan self-reliance, Pelagianism: man in a measure saves himself and receives grace as he deserves it; on the other hand the heresy of fatalist predestination, which casts aside human will and responsibility as of no avail whatever, and regards Jesus Christ as having died not for all, but only for the elect.

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There is covert Pelagianism in the doctrine of Molina; the Dominicans attacked it at Rome, and only a papal interdict of discussion prevented a cleavage. It is against this Neo-Pelagianism of the Jesuits that Bishop Jansenius of Ypres wrote his learned folio *Augustinus*; and it was only natural that the Jesuits should reply by charging the Jansenists of Port Royal with Calvinist fatalism. The *Provinciales* exhibit with consummate irony the unstable dubious position of the Dominican followers of St. Thomas in this conflict. In more substantial agreement with Jansenius than with Molina, they were yet in verbal agreement with the latter, owing perhaps to the Jesuit dexterous manipulation of traditional formulas of orthodoxy. To open the eyes of the Thomists to the real beneath the verbal issue and to win them to the support of Jansenist Augustinianism and so prevent the threatened anathema, was Arnauld's hope; it was also Pascal's immediate object in writing the *Provinciales*.

From this immediate issue over the doctrine of grace, Pascal is led to attack the Jesuits on a larger front. The self-reliance of the Molinist view of salvation is typical of the laxity and worldliness of Jesuit morality. Leaning on the learning of Arnauld and Nicole, and seasoning the intensity and severity of Port Royal with supreme controversial wit, Pascal lays bare, in a series of immortal letters, the unchristian compromise of the Jesuit with the powers of evil, Jesuit complacency, Jesuit pride and arrogance, Jesuit diplomacy and duplicity, Jesuit worldliness. Against Escobar's twenty-four new-fashioned church fathers, Pascal pleads for the old Augustinian faith, a faith from the world apart, a faith humble, vigilant, fearful—relying never on self, but ever leaning on God and Christ.

The *Provinciales* did not accomplish their immediate aim :

the Dominicans did not turn from Molina to Jansenius, and Port Royal was condemned, for, as Pascal grimly observed, it was easier to bring more monks to vote against Port Royal than to bring arguments against it. But the brilliant attack on Jesuit unchristian laxity dealt the society of Loyola a blow from which it never recovered: as Sainte-Beuve observes, Pascal destroyed forever Jesuit dominance in the government of the world.

I have not taken this time to discuss the Jansenist controversies of Pascal simply owing to the dialectic lure of the *Provinciales*, though that itself were reason enough. The *Provinciales* are in a sense propadeutic to the *Pensées*. Against Molina's Pelagianism, Pascal was defending the Augustinian Christianity of Jansenius; but what real assurance did he have that any of these second and third-hand alleged versions of the truth were themselves true? Was he right about Jansenius, or Jansenius about Augustine, or Augustine about Christianity, and what certainty availed of the truth of Christianity itself? The Jesuit could well lean back in his chair and quote his twenty-four doctors, himself being the twenty-fifth as occasion demanded. The Jesuit was not wedded to truth, he distinctly abdicated verity for probability. Would Pascal quote St. Augustine, St. Chrysostom, St. Ambrose, St. Jerome? The Jesuit father had Escobar's armory: Fernandez, Martinez, Suarez, Henriquez, Vasquez, Lopez, Gomez, Sanchez, and twice as many more. They didn't agree with each other, but what of it? If you would murder, here is Lessius to suit you; if not, there stands Vasquez on your side. One needs many guides if one plans to travel many roads. But Pascal would travel the one single road of truth, truth absolute and incontrovertible. Probabilism and casuistry he found intellectually intolerable and morally detestable. It is not

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merely that Escobar's twenty-four doctors contradict each other; if he maintains against them all the cause of Augustine, Pascal is not simply pitting authority against authority, one lion against twenty-four asses. Pascal is not essentially a dogmatic theologian, and mere authority counts with him nothing at all. His orthodoxy is the orthodoxy of truth, not the orthodoxy of papal bulls. Nor is he overwhelmed by numbers or by power. To the Jesuit fathers he declares nobly in the closing words of the *Twelfth Provinciale*: "You believe you have force and impunity on your side; but on my side I believe I have truth and innocence . . . Truth lasts forever and triumphs over its enemies, for it is eternal and mighty like God himself".

On questions of fact he would not submit to Rome, and one is moved to think that on questions of faith also he is ready to look beyond the Sorbonne and the Vatican. Pascal's early life had not been devoted in vain to scientific work: fact is fact for him, and truth, truth. He does not need Innocent the Tenth or the Seventh Alexander to tell him whether a certain doctrine is or is not to be found in the folio of Bishop Jansenius. He would repeat Galileo's words to the Inquisition, which had extracted a recantation from him regarding the movement of the earth: *E pur se muove!* Whether the earth moves or stands still is a question of fact, not of papal pronouncement. He would not turn from Arnauld to Escobar, or from Augustine to Molina simply because a Pope in Rome decrees that he do so. "If my letters are condemned in Rome," he writes, "that which I condemn in them is condemned in heaven." Beyond the Sorbonne and the Inquisition and the Vatican, he looks to the eternal source and ground of all truth. "Lord Jesus, I appeal to your tribunal!"

This, then, is the thorny problem which confronted the

author of the *Pensées*. Unlike the Jesuit Sophists, he believes that knowledge is more than opinion, and truth than mere probability. A grab-bag of authorities would not do for him; nor would he pin his faith blindly on anyone's authority. Behind the authority he would go to test its basis. He believes there is truth to be had; he has the test of it and would know if he had it; but he despairs of ever attaining it with his intellect. Here we perceive Pascal's scepticism, and also its limits. Behold this sick, suffering genius, wracked by a thousand pains: what made him so discontented in his science, what made him so unsettlingly intense in his faith?

We have now come to a book of fragments, notes—jotted down or dictated by Pascal in intervals between intense suffering—the whole forming a manuscript almost illegible and chaotic in its original state, a book nevertheless so soul-searching and soul-revealing that great minds do not know whether to be glad that it was never finished and polished off, or to wonder what amazing masterpiece it would have been had Pascal lived long enough to complete his work; a book beside which one puts the *Imitation of Christ* and St. Augustine's *Confessions*, and which French scholars would save and cherish above all other French books. This masterpiece is the *Pensées* (the *Thoughts*) of Blaise Pascal.

II

It is not for others only that Pascal planned his great Apology, of which only the random fragments are to be found in the book before us. He planned the Apology for himself first of all. The book was to contain letters, dialogues, eloquence, argument. Who can tell whether this sceptical passage or that infidel fragment express Pascal's

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own views or the views which, in a contemplated dialogue, he intended to combat? So Strowski warns us: imagine the *Provinciales* in the uncompleted state in which we find the *Pensées*. They would have been equally contradictory: a chaos of Jesuit tirades, Jansenist pleas, Pascalian dialectic. But there, as here, the problems would have remained the same. In the *Pensées* Pascal has argued the case for faith, but he has also argued the case for doubt: we have them both side by side, and the contrast is eloquent.

For such knowledge as is vouchsafed to man Pascal relies on the method of geometry. It consists, according to him, in defining all our terms and proving all our propositions. Now, if we go from involved and complex terms back to plainer and simpler terms we are led at last to primitive words that do not admit of definition. Similarly, if we trace a certain proposition to the propositions on which it rests for its proof, and these in turn to further and further prior propositions, we finally reach first principles and axioms which are undemonstrable. The geometrical method is thus perfectly certain so far as it goes, but inadequate and unconvincing in the end since it does not go far enough. Man, naturally helpless, sooner or later comes against a wall which he cannot surmount. This subtly precise game of science, in which the intellect manipulates its stock of concepts, affords Pascal no final satisfaction: what it proves it proves well, but it does not prove what Pascal, what in fact all thinking men want proved and assured—the ultimates of life and existence. So Pascal writes to Fermat, whom he calls the greatest geometer of Europe: "To speak frankly about geometry, I regard it as the highest exercise of the mind, but at the same time I know it to be so unavailing that I see little difference

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between a man who is merely a geometer and a skillful artisan."

Let not the last phrase escape us. On the gates of his Academy Plato had inscribed the words: "Let no ungeometrical person enter here". Science demands the precise definition and demonstration of which geometry is the model. But for true wisdom, for an adequate philosophy of life, one has to be more than merely a geometer, content to begin with a first page of axioms and definitions. One must challenge the meaning of number, motion, space, time, yes, and also of Being, Nature, world, life, thought, value, truth, beauty, good, God. The man who could perceive and express this truth as Pascal perceived and expressed it may not give us the final philosophy of life, but he would die trying to attain it.

New troubles beset us now. If geometry is precise but not final, philosophy is neither final nor precise. Here is human thought overreaching itself in its effort to comprehend the universe, God and man, and falling far short of its goal, confused and inconclusive. How can you measure infinity with a yardstick? Suppose you climb to the top of Mt. Cenis, Montaigne wrote: are you really any nearer the sky than you would be at the bottom of the sea? Suppose, disdaining geometry, you attempt philosophy: are you any nearer final truth? Only your footing is less secure. "For what, after all, is man in nature? With regard to the infinite, he is nothing; with regard to nothing, he is all: a mean between nothing and all. Infinitely far from comprehending the ultimate, the end of things and their first principles are hidden from him in impenetrable mystery—equally incapable of seeing the nothing from which he issues and the infinite in which he is submerged."

What are we to do, then? Shall we go with the men of

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the world, such as Méré, whose wit exceeds their intellectual supply or demand, and who, as Leibnitz tells us, set little value on what they do not understand? Or shall we more eloquently shrug our shoulders with Montaigne and, ignoring out duty to seek the truth, cheerily resign ourselves to our inability to find it? Pascal knew his Montaigne, every line and word, but he could not sink into the faint-hearted easy indolence of the *Essais*. The motto of Montaigne, "*Que sais-je?*" recalls Pilate's shrug: "What is truth?" Such disdain discloses the unheroic soul. As keenly as Montaigne, Pascal recognized the pitiful limits of our knowledge, but to him this was no occasion for idle acquiescence. It is, in fact, the tragedy of his spirit. He feels as if he is ever on the brink of an abyss: the abyss of the all-important unknown.

Pascal considered another philosophical alternative: the Stoic wisdom of Epictetus. Behold a sage who knows nothing of man's essential ignorance, knowing only man's duty. But his severity, noble dignity and fortitude, are they not in the end just pride, vain and futile?

There are Stoic moments in Pascal, and in him as in all of us, so Sainte-Beuve reminds us, there is not a little of Montaigne. But neither Montaigne's acquiescence nor the pathetic dignity of Epictetus can satisfy him. More intently and unflinchingly he would face man's plight and seek a way out. We move on a narrow strip of knowledge between two oceans of ignorance. Not one law but has its counter law, not one truth but turns out to be also false. Man treads no path that does not turn upon itself, to bring him back to the uncertainty with which he began. Real truth must be eternal, the same in Toulouse and in Paris; but what of our truths and our justice? If you lived on this side of the river, it would be murder for me to

kill you, my fellow. But you live on the other side of the river: in killing you, I am no assassin, but a brave son of my country. "A meridian settles the truth. . . . Truth this side of the Pyrenees, error on the other side." Is our virtue an eternal value, or is it of this life only? We shrug our shoulders regarding the hereafter; yet how can we doubt that whether we be mortal or immortal makes all the difference in morals? Equally halting and inconclusive is our thought on all ultimate questions. "Incomprehensible that God exists, and incomprehensible that He does not exist; that the soul is in the body, and that we have no soul; that the world is or is not created, that there is or isn't original sin."

Is the field abandoned, then, in possession of the sceptic? Pascal cannot banish doubt, yet he cannot endure its withering effect. The notion of infinity overwhelms him. Kant was stirred to noble ardor by the sight of the celestial spaces; Pascal found their eternal silence harrowing: "When I consider the short span of my life, absorbed in the eternity before and after, the small space that I fill and even that I see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces which I know not and which know me not, I am dismayed and amazed to find myself here rather than there; for there is no reason whatever why here rather than there, why now rather than some other time. Who has put me here? By whose order and direction has this place and time been destined to me?"

We are moving, faster than appears, to the climax of this drama of the spirit. Thought insists on scaling the Infinite, and cannot scale it. Here is man's misery and here also man's grandeur, and here must we seek the way out. We read in Lévy-Bruhl: "Man cannot be incurably helpless, as Montaigne says, and at the same time have

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duties imposed upon him such as are pointed out by Epicurus." Yet as far as thought goes they are both right. Reason cannot remove this contradiction: we must rise to a higher point of view if the fuller truth is to be revealed.

There is a hierarchy of orders, Pascal declares; from the lower to the higher is always an amazing leap. There is a material order, there is a mental order, there is an order of values—Pascal calls it *charité*. Just as all the length in the world will not give us breadth, nor all the length and breadth together give us depth, so no amount of matter, bodies, firmaments, stars and earths, can yield or are worth one little mind or thought. Mind, thought, is another, a higher order of reality. And so, in turn, the whole universe of matter and mind will not of itself yield one act of true charity, one moment of worth. Charity, value, again, is another, a higher order of reality.

Here is thought enmeshed in contrarities. What will resolve the dilemmas of scepticism? A higher court than the court of reason: from the order of thought we must rise to the order of *charité*, of value. Pascal's tactics here suggest the Hegelian, but his road is that of the mystic. On the night of November twenty-third, 1654, the night of his second conversion, Pascal did not reason, did not have to reason; he saw face to face, saw with a higher vision a higher light. Behold the truth of Montaigne and the truth of Epictetus: these two contrary truths are one in the truth of Christ. In Christ's Gospel the misery and the grandeur of man are made truly one: the child of sin is the child of God. To perceive this truth, more than reason is required: this last wisdom, just as all ultimate truths and all first principles, can be known only by the heart. This indeed is the wisdom of all knowledge, to recognize its limits. There is nothing more reasonable than

this disavowal of reason, the submission to feeling. "The heart has it reasons, which reason does not know at all. . . . It is the heart which perceives God, and not reason. This is faith: God made evident to the heart, not to reason." You may ask love to justify itself, to state its grounds. This it does: a catalogue of halting reasons, so many nothings, but the heart somehow transfuses these nothings into one ardent reality.

III

In order to possess the great truths of religion, how do we rise from the order of thought to the order of charity, from reason to the heart, from knowledge to faith? Inspiration is the perfect path; God in his grace must speak to man. There are humbler approaches, however: reason and custom may serve us here. If they cannot establish our faith, they may yet help to remove obstacles to it, may prepare the way.

But how are we to prove God's existence? "If there is a God, He is infinitely incomprehensible, since, having no parts nor limits, He is out of touch with us. We are thus incapable of knowing what He is, or whether He exists. Accordingly, who would dare to undertake the solution of this question? Not we, we are out of touch with Him altogether." The Christian who believes without pretending to prove his faith is after all right, for how are any proofs possible here? "God exists, or He does not exist. Now, to which side shall we incline? Reason can settle nothing here: an infinite chaos is in our way. A game is being played, at the end of this infinite distance, which will come out heads or tails. What will you wager? By reason you can make neither the one nor the other; by reason you can support neither side."

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We have come now to the famous wager of Pascal, which has occasioned endless controversy. Is this a dialogue with an unbeliever, or is Pascal disputing God's existence with himself? Certain it seems that if knowledge about God is beyond the reach of our reason, then the recognition of its helplessness is the only reasonable course open to reason, and agnosticism the true wisdom. Does God exist or not? I do not know; I cannot say; how then can I wager? "The right thing is not to wager at all."

But this agnostic withdrawal from the wager of eternity, is it not in effect itself a wager? To act so as to ignore the issue whether God exists or not, is virtually to deny God's existence. This is, indeed, the most reckless of choices: to move blandly in the face of possible eternal ruin. Theoretically Pascal's reason counselled sceptical inaction, but he found the agnostic practice intolerable. If we were to wait upon certainty before acting, could we act at all? We must act to-day in preparation for to-morrow, although we may never see the morrow. Every step we take is a step in the dark. Whether we march or whether we stand still we are invariably gambling on the uncertain. It behooves us to use our poor reason in determining the nature of the hazards we run in this world of uncertainties.

God exists, or God does not exist,—and by God's existence Pascal understands here the whole of the Christian religion,—God exists or God does not exist. This is of all issues the most solemn and fatal; it imposes itself on you; you cannot shirk it; willy-nilly, Pascal says, you must wager *il faut parier*. On which side will you stake your life, your soul? Since you must choose, let us see on which side your interest lies. Whether you choose the one or the other is, as far as reason goes, indifferent, for there is no reason either way. But what about your fortune, your beatitude or your

irretrievable ruin? Either there is a God, perfect goodness and wisdom and power, and this world-course is a solemn drama of Divine Providence governing all destiny; or else there is no God, and this world is a vast machine of matter-in-motion, or else immense and irremediable chaos. Either there is a God, and your life and death are but the prelude to an eternal career of bliss or damnation; or there is no God, and your lot is as the lot of all other clods of moist earth. What have you to gain, and what to lose, if you choose one way or the other, heads or tails? Suppose you live your life as if God existed: you may, of course, miss the so-called pleasures of this brief life, but, again, you may gain an eternity of heaven. On the other hand, live your life as if there were no God: you may then have your sinful way here and now, and then death and nothing more; but, my soul, it is also possible that you may face eternal damnation. Staked against possible heaven and hell, what are the pleasures of this life worth? Nothing at all. The infinite is staked against the finite, to-day and to-morrow against eternity. How can you then hesitate about your choice? Choose for God: you thus insure yourself against the hazard of damnation, you stake your brief life on the chance of eternal bliss. Even if there were only one chance that God exists and ten thousand chances that there is no God, still the infinite disparity between the hazards involved would warrant your staking your life on God's existence.

Behold Pascal's immortal wager. But the soul of man replies: be it as you say; all the same, you are forcing me to yield my life against my will. The fact is, I am so made that I cannot believe in God. Will you damn me for my inability? What am I to do? Even if my reason accedes, my heart resists the call of faith.

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True, Pascal answers: if reason cannot help you here, habit and custom shall. Your heart is resistant because it is wedded to passion, to the lusts of this world. Break down the resistance to faith, curb your passions. You cannot believe? Enter anyhow upon the path of the believer, do as he does, act as if you were a believer, go to mass, take holy water. "This will make you believe and will stultify you, *cela vous abêtira*". The word is terrible; we shudder as it comes from Pascal's lips and we dare not look at him lest we see on his face the ironic grin of the mocking unbeliever. Port Royal could not bear, or did not dare, to print this word. But there is no grin of mockery on Pascal's lips: terrible exhorter though he be, he never loses sight of the other side. To the unbeliever such artificial acquiescence seems debasing stultification. Mechanically to go through the motions of a ritual, to drug and stupefy myself into alien piety: "This is just what I fear," the soul protests. "And why?" Pascal replies: "What have you to lose?" Eternity is at stake for you, and you are worrying over your sorry dignity and self-respect. Your supreme interest counsels the wager: close your eyes and plunge forward, blindly if need be: habit will sweep aside the obstacles in your way, while you wait for the grace of God to illumine you with the higher light, to humble and transfigure and exalt you all at once.

IV

Pascal is one of the most defiant warriors for the Christian faith; but his wager has proved a precarious bulwark to orthodoxy. Orthodoxy demands a different sort of assurance. Different is the assurance of St. Paul: "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that

day." Here is straightforward unquestioning trust. Now a certain type of believer demands for the voyage of his spirit, not only the full-blown sails of faith, but also the rudder and compass of understanding. Believe, without understanding if you must, Clement of Alexandria would say, but if you believe with understanding, all the better. To the simple assent of faith the gnosis of Christian intelligence is as the man full grown to the infant. This is the great confidence in the intellect which distinguishes the best of Scholastic thought, particularly the great succession of Dominican philosophers of the Thirteenth Century: philosophy is the handmaiden of theology, but also a necessary introduction to it. There has always been an opposite sort of believer, who has felt that his faith is somehow compromised if it leans on intelligence. Defiantly he has scorned all proofs, as if to reassert the solidity of his faith by rejecting all rational basis for it. This is the view of Tertullian: separate Jerusalem from Athens, the Church of Christ from the Academy of Plato. What are proofs and arguments to me: do you say that what I believe is undemonstrable, that it is absurd? Well, I believe it just because it is absurd, *Credo quia absurdum est*. This type of mind is not exclusively Christian. You find it in Islam, in India. Here is Al-Ghazzali of Bagdad, scornful of all philosophy in his reaffirmation of Mohammedan orthodoxy; here are immemorial Oriental mystics deeming the surrender of intelligence a prerequisite of wisdom. Not far from here is also Duns Scotus, of Oxford, *Doctor Subtilis*, uprising against St. Thomas for his reliance on the intellect. Will is superior to intelligence, according to him, and the only ground of faith is divine revelation. The arguments of reason are inconclusive in theology: you cannot prove God's omnipotence nor the immortality of the soul. In all

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his thinking Duns Scotus widens the breach between reason and religion, disclaiming any reliance on demonstration, firm and self-sufficient in his orthodox faith.

But there is danger in this defiant faith, danger of results wholly unintended by its champions. Do you disdain in your religion to rely on reason; would you separate theology from philosophy and science? Well enough: you remain, then, wholly devoted to your faith by fiat: your religion cannot be proved and does not have to be proved. But after you come others who take you at your word, that religion does not admit of proof, but who, unlike you, are mainly interested in what has to be and can be proved. They leave you to your undemonstrable faith and they go their own secular way. So it is that Duns Scotus, arch-believer himself, became a factor in the disintegration of belief which marked the collapse of Scholasticism and the beginnings of the scientific Renaissance.

Pascal likewise tells us that we know nothing and can prove nothing about the fundamentals of religion. We cannot know what God's nature is, nor even whether there is a God at all. Faith lacks rational ground; to the intellect of man, the Gospel of Christ is as St. Paul said it was to the Greek, folly. To all this, the modern unbeliever nods approval: he has made his own anthology of passages from Pascal, and what Pascal has said on this score no one can say better. But when Pascal invites him to play heads or tails on God and Christ, the unbeliever declines. No gambler, he; he would stick to what admits of proof. Pascal may convince us that it is a far better bargain all around to wager on heads rather than on tails; he has not convinced us that heads have any advantage over tails, nor has he gained the man who is not impressed by the stakes, or who simply will not gamble.

For consider: the whole force of Pascal's wager as an argument for Christian faith is to be found in the immense disparity between the stakes for and against God. What decides Pascal's wager is the prospect of heaven or hell. But what warrants our judgment that, if there is a God, he has eternal heavenly bliss or else hell everlasting in store for us? Do we really know any more about this than we know whether God exists at all? True enough, you may either wager or not wager: there is here no third alternative, and Pascal insists that wager you must. But why is he so sure of the number of his alternatives, and of the stakes involved? Do we have just two alternatives: heads or tails? Pascal's geometrical bias has betrayed him where it should have served to sustain. The number of available alternatives may vary with each wager. Heads or tails, if you are flipping a coin; but any one of six chances if you throw a die, or one in thirty-six if you throw a pair of dice. So a number may be either equal or not equal to another number; but whether you prefer the one to the other may depend on a different chance, whether it be equal or greater or less. If in the cases mentioned the number of alternatives is fixed—2, 3, 6, 36—the situation becomes increasingly more complex as we approach more serious issues. Logic should keep us vigilant here lest we stray through incomplete disjunction. Perhaps we may say: Newton is either correct or incorrect. But can we say: either Newton or Einstein? No more now than before Einstein: to-morrow a third alternative may be available for us. Who can say once for all in how many respects Newton may be wrong, or Einstein? Truth is one, but error is manifold. Can we say: either Plato or Aristotle, either St. Thomas or Duns Scotus, either Calvin or Molina? Still

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less can we split things in morals: is every one of us either a saint or a sinner?

So here we must go back with Pascal to his wager and reëxamine the throws and the stakes. Assuredly the man who denies God's existence is either right or wrong, and likewise the man who affirms God's existence is either right or wrong. We may grant to Pascal that whether either be right or wrong cannot be determined by reason; that is not the point now, but rather this: what is affirmed or denied when God's existence or non-existence is affirmed or denied? Am I to believe in God's grace with Augustine or with Molina? These are different views of God's grace, and in a measure different beliefs in God. Pascal has reduced his alternatives to two: heads or tails, either Jansenist Catholicism or atheism. If you could equate belief in God with Jansenist Catholicism, then you have your stakes, eternal bliss in Heaven or hell everlasting, and then you may perhaps continue with Pascal's wager.

But surely other alternatives are available. You may believe in God and yet just because of your supreme confidence in his infinite love reject hell everlasting altogether; you may be a pantheist and long for reabsorption into the Infinite; you may be a Buddhist and look forward to the blessed selfless peace of Nirvana. Personal immortality may to you be a priceless boon and may decide you to stake your life on the side that would assure your soul of a hereafter; but you may have learned to look beyond the individual self, and with the Positivist seek survival in Humanity; or, again, you may share the craving for personal extinction which characterizes a certain type of Oriental. If immortality is for you a nightmare and for me a cherished hope, your dread may lead you to gamble on materialistic atheism as my hope may lead me to gamble along with

Pascal. With every shade of religious opinion a new set of stakes emerges and we have really a new wager.

To insist on the wager in Pascal's terms is to mix considerable bigotry with our scepticism. It is remarkable that a mind like Pascal, believing itself so hopelessly ignorant about God, should yet have felt so familiar about the operations of Divine Providence in case any Divine Providence obtained. If it has come to flipping coins over God, if our reason is really incapable of knowing God's nature or even God's existence, then how can we say that, if God exists, He will deal thus and so with us? If you are dogmatic in your estimate of God's nature and sceptical about God's very existence, then you will have to flip a coin about it. But if you disclaim familiarity with the workings of a possibly existent Divine Providence, then you cannot list the stakes of your wager, then you do not know your alternatives, then you have no wager at all.

Do you, then, resign yourself utterly to withering scepticism? Let us see. The defiance of faith in Pascal's wager is dismal: face to face with possible irremediable ruin, yet altogether in the dark; forced to stake all blindly on a throw of destiny! If there be any such Divine Providence, ready to damn us forever for not believing in Him whom through no fault of ours we cannot know, then this idea would indeed be food for pessimists; here would be a real nursery of irreligion. Moreover, if we are condemned to incertitude, to wagers and possibilities, is not the casuistry of the Jesuit, after all, acceptable and sound? There is a disquieting similarity between the doctrine which Pascal combats in the *Provinciales* and the advice which he gives to the unbeliever, to stultify himself, if need be, by attending mass and taking holy water. Well does Saisset declare: "To replace certitude by probability, to appeal to interest instead

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of appealing to religion and to the heart, to make a machine of yourself, to stultify yourself, these are the detestable procedures which compromised the name of the Society of Jesus”.

There is a Pascal who, committed to eternal truth and finding this truth in Jansenism, attacked with heroic dogmatism the protean hosts of casuistry. There is another Pascal, the prey of general scepticism, who, doubting all yet unwilling to let go of his Jansenist faith, resorted to flipping coins to retain his hold on his God. These two Pascals are one, and reveal a most baffling genius. Pascal seems to counsel us thus: proceed confidently with geometry in the realm of the finite, relying on the certainty of science; recognize, however, that all your finite certainties float in the ocean of infinite doubt; nevertheless yield yourself humbly to the call of faith, stake your life on the possible truth of Christianity.

Is this sensible? Surely it is blighting to reason. There is deeper wisdom in Pascal's amazing treasury of thought. He is communing with the Saviour: “Be comforted,” the Saviour says to him, “you would not seek me, had you not found me. I was thinking of you in my agony; I have shed such drops of blood for you. . . . Your conversion is my own concern; fear not and pray with confidence as if for me”. Here is the most poignant and the most profound note in Pascal: poignant in the white-heat phrase: “I have shed such drops of blood for you!” profound and luminous in the initial immortal words: “You would not seek me had you not found me”. The soul groping in the dark marshes of doubt pushes on and refuses to sink back. In thus pushing on and refusing to sink back, in holding its course ever solidly ahead, it is itself proof eternal that there is solid ground ever ahead. Is God's truth done and finished and

stored away on divine pantry-shelves beyond our reach; is it done and dead and laid out under divine seals which we may never break? Or is it not rather ever in the making? Is God himself the unreadable Preface of the book of creation, or is he not himself the living careering heart of the book, ever to be sought and found, yet never encased in a formula: the infinite, eternal, ever-present Beyond?

A deal of religious perplexity is due to our trying to think of God as if He were a reality external to us and to our hunger and thirst after him. But, like the reality of all values, may not the reality of the Divine be in the divine quest itself? The logical judgment expresses logical value; scientific thought, the search after knowledge and truth, is itself knowledge, insight, truth. Poetic activity, the pursuit of beauty, is itself the supreme manifestation of beauty. The indubitable evidence of the reality of moral value is our own endeavor after it. In science *is* Truth; in art *is* Beauty; in goodness *is* Good; in godliness *is* God. The ancient Hindu who conceived of the supreme Brahman as the divine worshipful urge which created all that there is, showed profound insight into the nature of spiritual reality. "You would not seek me, had you not found me. . . . Your conversion is my own concern; fear not and pray with confidence *as if for me.*"

How can man love God, how can he *know* God whom he has not seen except he love and know his brother whom he has seen? How can we reach the greater truth except through the lesser? Each truth that turns out to be also false, every good that we find to be also evil, is, not a sign of our impotence and ignorance, but of our strength and wisdom. In the striving after truth, beauty, good, God, in the reach after eternal values, man attains unto the only real eternity there is, the eternity of the ideal. Only in the

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higher light is the lower light disclosed as dimness; only the larger good renders the lesser good evil. "When I was a child," St. Paul tells us, "I spake as a child, I felt as a child, I thought as a child,"—and quite rightly; but, he goes on, "now that I am become a man, I have put away childish things." Only he might have said: "As I become a man, I am putting away childish things", for the full manhood of the spirit is ever *being* attained.

Here Pascal's own career, tragic as it is in its misery and in its grandeur, is a living symbol of the truth before us. What can be more crushing than this "tragedy of a powerful and energetic spirit in an imbecile body", prematurely burnt out and disintegrating in constant anguish? It is the rude jest of frail flesh at the expense of the spirit. And the spirit of Pascal: what a tragic vortex it is of spiritual integrity and heroism, halting distrust, anguished contrariety, sophistry, stultifying bigotry, reckless hazard, and headlong surrender! But hear the high note that is sounded in this life of Pascal, a note all the clearer, the more heroic because it sounds from the dark depths of despond. It is a luminous shaft of light that ascends from the abyss of human misery to the divine heights of truth, the heights of aspiring intelligence. Read a page that my friend Albert Guérard calls the noblest in French prose:

"Man is but a reed, the weakest in Nature; but he is a thinking reed. It is not necessary that the whole universe should arm itself in order to crush him. A vapor, a drop of water, would be sufficient to kill him. But even though the universe should crush him, man would still be nobler than that which is killing him, for he knows that he is dying, and the advantage that the universe has over him. The universe does not know.

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"All our dignity therefore lies in our thought. It is upon that that we must depend, not upon space and time which we cannot fill. Let us therefore strive to think well: such is the foundation of moral life."